

The End of An Era

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FAREWELL, DR. M

IT HAS TAKEN a long time to dispel the disbelief that greeted Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's decision to retire. Now that he has given a date, October 31, the reality is sinking in. It's the end of an era, and for a country led by one of Asia's more controversial leaders, it's a time to reflect on his accomplishments and paradoxes, and the ways in which they have rubbed off onto Malaysia.

Mahathir drove Malaysians towards modernity and prosperity with the determination of a visionary, yet he preached wariness and suspicion of the outside world. He railed against ignorance and parochialism at home, yet when he demonized the West, he sounded little better than those he castigated for religious intolerance. Under his rule, Malaysia grew out of colonial reliance on tin and rubber into a producer of hi-tech goods. But the increase of patronage in the business world spawned instances of corruption and a lack of transparency.

His approach to the leadership of Malaysia over the past 20 years has been to browbeat, cajole and on occasion persecute those who don't share his vision of progress. There have been spectacular results: Witness the rapidly changing Kuala Lumpur skyline, its modern infrastructure and the boom of the 1990s. Some economists consider that he saved Malaysia from experiencing the worst of the 1997 economic crisis by fixing the exchange rate and temporarily imposing capital controls—though in the longer term he may have damaged Malaysia's free-market credentials.

There have also been darker moments. Mahathir's duels with the judiciary and the sultans weakened the rule of law and Malaysia's federal system, important checks on executive power. His disdain for untrammelled freedom of the press has cowed the country's media. His anti-Western rhetoric has painted him and his country as reluctant to join the global community. His 1998 falling-out with his deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, divided the country, undermined support for his party and drew anger from abroad. He leaves to his successor, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, the rising political challenge of conservative Islam.

In the end, Mahathir will be judged as a great Asian leader. But his legacy will be coloured by his uncompromising political views and the way he recast Malaysia's democratic institutions in a more authoritarian mould. Many Malaysians, when asked about Mahathir's successor, say they are happy that the next prime minister will be quieter and less controversial.

Though it sometimes appears otherwise, Mahathir has not been Malaysia's only prime minister. The country was tolerably well led by three predecessors who established the political framework that has maintained harmony in a multiracial society. Mahathir inherited a country that was settling down, and his key challenges were economic. Perhaps his principal achievement was to meet them.

He may be retiring, but Mahathir is not leaving the stage. He has said he will not emulate the role of senior minister carved out by Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore. Close associates say that, like Lee, he plans to write his memoirs. The Mahathir story isn't over.

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